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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the findings of a research study that investigated the ways in which Australian regular class teachers cope during inclusive education and the specific issues which are stressful for them. The study was undertaken in primary schools in Queensland, Australia, during 1997. Initial focus group interviews with 17 regular class teachers currently involved in inclusive education identified key issues in the education of students with a disability in regular education classes. These discussions focused on aspects of inclusion that regular class teachers found stressful and the ways in which they coped with the difficulties they encountered, the availability and usefulness of support structures, and the benefits obtained. Subsequently, two Likert style questionnaires were developed to assess the usefulness of various problem-focused or emotion-focused coping behaviors and the degree to which identified issues were stressful for 40 regular class teachers during inclusion. The top four stressful issues included teacher accountability for the child's educational outcomes, the child physically attacking others, obtaining funding, and reduced ability to teach other students. Effective coping strategies were maintaining a sense of humor, making a plan of action and following it, and discussing the situation with specialist personnel. (Contains 19 references.) (CR)

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Teachers' perceptions of the stress associated with inclusive education and their methods of coping.

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The current educational philosophy is wherever possible to educate all children, including those with a disability, in regular classes. Inevitably this poses different pressures on teachers who need to cater for an ever increasing range of student abilities within regular classrooms. This paper reports the findings of a research study undertaken to determine the ways in which regular class teachers cope during inclusive education and the specific issues which are stressful for them. The study was undertaken in primary schools in Queensland during 1997. Initial focus group interviews with regular class teachers currently involved in inclusive education identified key issues in the education of students with a disability in regular classes. These discussions focused on aspects of inclusion that regular class teachers found stressful and the ways in which they coped with these, the difficulties they encountered, the availability and usefulness of support structures, and the benefits obtained. Subsequently, two Likert style questionnaires were developed to assess the usefulness of various problem-focused or emotion-focused coping behaviours and the degree to which identified issues were stressful for regular class teachers during inclusion. Differences between teachers from regional schools where alternative placement options exist for children with a disability, and teachers from rural areas where no optional placements are available, were considered.

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Introduction

It is not possible to discuss the effect of inclusive education on regular class teachers without considering first the rapidly changing environment of their work context. According to Hargreaves (1994) the era of high modernity that has characterised the change process during this century has been rooted in momentous sociohistorical transformations. Schools which have attempted to keep up with reform have found themselves in a "balkanized, specialized, modernistic school system confronting new and complex conditions of postmodernity" (Hargreaves, 1994, p.28) In addition to the profound social, economic, and political changes in the 90s, educational systems have concommitedly been affected by increased legislation, a plethora of policies for every type of educational provision, and rapidly changing educational practice (Vlachou & Barton, 1994).

In recent years there has also been a move towards promoting greater professionalism in teaching

together with a need for improving teaching standards (Louis & Smith, 1990). Increased professionalism is already being evidenced by teaching involving greater complexity, more sophisticated judgment, and by an increase in collective decision-making (Hargreaves & Goodson, 1994). According to Hargreaves and Goodson (1994), there is concurrently a converse decrease in professionalism which is promulgated by the introduction of more pragmatic training for teachers, reduced discretion over goals and purposes, and an increased dependence on externally prescribed learning outcomes. This is likely to lead to the emergence of new definitions of teacher professionalism which more closely reflect broader social agendas including issues of social justice, rights and equity, and the move towards an increase in national policies.

Educational Practices for Children with Special Needs

Concomitant with the increasing number of general changes occurring in education there has been a major international reform in the education of children with special needs. There has been a strong emphasis on a move away from the traditional dual special and regular education systems towards a more inclusive mainstream model. Inclusive education has been promoted from a social justice and rights ethos which promulgates equity and equal opportunity for all children. The movement towards an inclusive educational system, however, that requires the merger of 'special' and 'mainstream' education has been seen by some to be quite ineffective (Clark, Dyson, Millward, & Skidmore, 1997). Clark et al. (1997) propose that this has been the result of a failure to take into account the wider socio-political context in which inclusion is located, together with a mainstream educational system which has "remained firmly answerable to its own necessities and imperatives and has shown little inclination to be driven by the principles and priorities of special needs" (p. 166).

In recent years in the UK, the Education Reform Act of 1988 (Stillman, 1990) and the Education Act of 1993 (Simkins, 1994) have provided for significant changes in special education service provision. These Acts together with the Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs (Department for Education 1994) have promoted a new system for educating children with special needs. There is now greater emphasis placed on inclusive education. Concurrent with this legislative framework in the UK has been the restructuring of education which has promoted Local Management of Schools (LMS), the movement towards Grant Maintained Status (GMS), and the National Curriculum. All of these have been seen to impact on the implementation of inclusion.

With the introduction of a National Curriculum in England and Wales, Vlachou and Barton (1994) perceive that this has led to a very restrictive notion of learning that is no longer child-centered but is inflexible and subject oriented. This lack of responsiveness to the individual needs of children together with the increased emphasis on examination results, has meant that teachers have tended to prioritise their responsibilities and focus increasingly on the mainstream children rather than those with more specialised and individualised needs. There has also been increasing competitiveness in the UK due to the introduction of standardised testing and the move towards open enrollment. British teachers have reported that they are frequently subjected to unacceptable levels of criticism (Vlachou & Barton, 1994). Teachers also propose that they are deemed by the public to be ineffective educators and non-professional in their teaching. They are additionally blamed for declining educational standards in British schools. Teachers themselves find that the continual demands of bureaucratic requirements reduce their actual teaching time which is particularly frustrating for them and this gives rise to tensions and dissatisfaction in their jobs. Teachers' commitment to inclusive education in this type of climate is very difficult.

The role of teachers has also changed dramatically in the USA and Canada in the last decade.

Expectations for teachers have similarly intensified, there have been demands for increased accountability, responsibility, and in particular greater personal involvement in educational reform, curriculum development, and overall school improvement (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1991). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, (IDEA, 1997) legislates for service provision for students with a disability to occur, whenever possible, in the regular classroom. Inclusive education in the USA is directed by federal and state legislation which provide a basis for ensuring non-discrimination with respect to children with a disability, their equal access to appropriate education, and the financial provision necessary to support them. As a consequence, regular class teachers have found that they have become increasingly responsible for students with a wide range of abilities within their classrooms. Simultaneously, there has been a rapid increase in educational litigation with teachers being held liable for the well being and educational outcomes of their students.

Similarly, in Australia, the education of children with disabilities has changed markedly during recent years (Forlin, 1997). The legislative framework in Australia mirrors that in the USA whereby the Commonwealth retains limited central powers and the responsibility for education is devolved to the state governments (Forlin & Forlin, 1996). Although education is the responsibility of individual states and territories, and consequently each jurisdiction has its own Education Act, there are many similarities between the contents of the individual Acts. Currently, there is no law in Australia that mandates for the inclusion of children with disabilities in regular classes but there is a rapidly increasing trend towards implementing policies that promote greater inclusion. Many teachers are, therefore, finding themselves with students in their regular classes who have a range of intellectual and physical disabilities from mild through to severe and profound, in addition to many other children with specialised needs. This is particularly noticeable in rural communities in Australia where all children have to attend their local school due to their isolation and distance from any other support facilities.

A further central issue in the discourse of educational reform, and in the consideration of the implementation of new policies such as inclusive educational practices, is that of teacher efficacy. According to Smylie (1990), teacher efficacy is considered to be "one of the most significant social-psychological factors influencing teachers' work" (p. 48). Teacher efficacy is purported to relate directly to valued outcomes such as teacher classroom behaviours, student achievement, and innovation (Smylie, 1990). Teachers who perceive that they are capable in one particular context are more likely to teach better in that domain than are those who purport to have a low self-efficacy. Efficacy should, however, not be considered as uniform as perceptions of self-efficacy are likely to vary depending upon the task, the domain, and the difficulty (Bandura, 1986).

Teacher efficacy is also closely linked to commitment. The beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours of teachers that are likely to enhance their commitment to their work are often seen to be linked to a strong person-organisation fit. According to Reyes (1990) teacher commitment is "a psychological identification of the individual teacher with the school's goals and values, and the intention of that teacher to maintain organisational membership and become involved in the job beyond personal interest" (pp. 153-154). Teacher commitment is enhanced when individual beliefs and values are reflected in a school's culture.

In order to cope with the widening array of responsibilities that teachers are experiencing they often set themselves impossibly high expectations. As Fullan and Hargreaves (1991) state:

> Many teachers appear to drive themselves in an attempt to meet the virtually unattainable

standards of perfection they set themselves. They do not appear to need direction or pressure from above to motivate them in their quest. They drive themselves quite hard enough (p. 42).

This self need to prove their commitment and efficacy can be heightened in teachers by the introduction of new philosophies, such as that of inclusive education. The expectation that teachers will be able to cope with a constantly changing educational environment imposed by policy makers, together with their own desire to maintain their perceived efficacy and level of commitment, is likely to dramatically increase the chances of psychological distress among them.

Inclusive Education and The Regular Class Teacher

There appears little doubt that the role of the regular class teacher has altered considerably as a direct outcome of these changes. Regular class teachers are now required to cater for a diverse range of student abilities and to assume greater responsibility for their education (Casey, 1994). Inclusion in Australian schools has been found to make considerable demands on the regular class teacher (Ward, Center, and Ferguson, 1988). In many instances inclusion has occurred without an adequate understanding of the implications for teachers who have much of the responsibility for implementing such policies (Goodfellow, 1990). Acceptance by Australian educators of the philosophical underpinnings of inclusion has been varied and dependent upon the type and degree of severity of a child's disability (Forlin, Douglas & Hattie, 1996). Whereas, there has been support for the inclusion of children in regular classes with mild to moderate disabilities, there is continued concern raised regarding including those children who exhibit extreme behaviours. There is also considerable variation in inclusive practices both interstate and intrastate, particularly in the amount of support available for teachers. According to Fields (1993), rural teachers for example, are expected to facilitate inclusion without access to the same level of support experienced by colleagues in larger and less remote schools. The provision of advisory, consultative, and direct support services are either unavailable to small remote schools or are "so infrequent as not to have any meaningful impact" (Fields, 1993, p. 14).

The benefits and difficulties associated with inclusive education, therefore, need to be considered within this rapidly changing socio-political context in which teachers work. The following research study aims to identify some of the benefits and difficulties perceived by regular class teachers in Australia when they are involved with inclusive educational practices.

Method

Interviews were conducted with 17 regular primary class teachers and teaching principals from 13 schools within one region in Queensland. All interviews were undertaken either at the school (N=11) or by teleconference (N=6) and were tape recorded. The teachers who were interviewed had at least one child in their regular class who had been ascertained as needing support for either an intellectual or physical impairment at Level 4, 5, or 6 (moderate to severe impairment). The children at these schools who require additional support for an intellectual or physical impairment are unable to access special education schools or education support units as they live too far away from them. Consequently, all children at these schools are included in regular classes. A part-time aide is provided at each school depending upon the level of support required and the local availability of a suitable person. Teachers also receive regular support from Advisory Visiting Teachers, the staff at their local School Support Centre, and their own school's Support Teacher Learning Difficulties. Limited support from occupational therapists, speech pathologists, guidance officers, and health care workers is also available on request.

The benefits and difficulties that these teachers found with inclusive practices were considered for four categories: the regular class children without an impairment; the students who have been ascertained as needing at least moderate support for an impairment; the classroom learning environment; and the teacher. A detailed analysis of these findings is reported elsewhere (Forlin, 1997a).

Subsequently, two questionnaires were developed, based on the results of the focus group interviews. The questions pertained to regular class teachers' perceptions of stress and their use of coping strategies when including a child who had been ascertained as needing support at Level 4, 5, or 6 for either an intellectual or physical impairment in their regular classroom. Each questionnaire contained four parts which addressed the following:

Part A: General Information including demographic details of the school and personal teaching data

Part B: Information about children in the teacher's class related to ascertainment, support personnel, and at-risk children

Part C: Potential stressors associated with inclusive education

Part D: The usefulness of a range of coping strategies employed during inclusive education

Part C required teachers to respond to the degree that they perceived various issues were stressful for them. This employed a five point Likert scale from *does not apply* (1) to *extremely stressful* (5). A total of 74 issues were raised covering the eight categories of administrative, support, health safety and hygiene, student behaviour, the classroom, parents, professional competency, and personal competency. Part D requested information on the usefulness of a range of coping strategies that could be employed by teachers. This section consisted of 34 items that included emotion-focused and problem-focused coping behaviours. A five point Likert scale was employed that ranged from *does not apply* (1) to *extremely useful* (5).

Questionnaires were sent in Term 4, 1997, to all regular class teachers in state primary schools in Queensland who were identified by Education Queensland as having at least one child in their classroom who had been ascertained as requiring support for either an intellectual or physical impairment at Level 4, 5, or 6. Questionnaires were distributed region by region and the following results pertain to the data from one of the 12 regions only (Darling Downs Region).

Results

Completed questionnaires were received from 40 teachers in the Darling Downs Region. Eighty percent were female teachers, 40% were working in multi-age classrooms and 20% were teaching principals. Of the total sample 40% had been involved with inclusive education for greater than three years, and 62.5% had not received any special needs training. The mean responses for each of the eight categories are reported in Table 1. Overall, the most stressful issues for regular class teachers when including a child with a disability in their classroom were those that were associated with their perceived professional competence, together with administrative issues, and student behaviour problems.

Table 1

Mean Responses for Teacher Stress for Each Category

Category	Mean Response
Administrative Issues	3.27
Support	3.07
Health, Safety, & Hygiene	3.03
Student Behaviour	3.23
The Classroom	3.13
Parents	2.76
Professional Competency	3.33
Personal Competency	2.82
Total Mean Response	3.08

Note: Range = 2 (*not stressful);* 3 (*somewhat stressful*); 4 (*quite stressful*); to 5(*extremely stressful*)

Specifically, the issues which caused teachers most stress are recorded in Table 2. These issues relate closely to two perspectives. The first are personal difficulties for teachers, and the second are those that relate to the activities of the child. Almost all of the teachers believed that they were personally held accountable for the educational outcomes and welfare of the child and they found this quite stressful. Meeting the child's needs and sustaining an active learning environment for the child was also stressful for almost every teacher. This was combined with their perceptions that their ability to teach other students as effectively as they would like was consequently reduced. The most stressful issues for the majority of teachers in relation to the child's behaviour were that in almost every instance teachers considered that the child displayed inappropriate social skills and had a short attention span. In some instances the children physically attacked others, had unpredictable reactions, and were manipulative. Where these occurred these were deemed quite stressful for the teachers. Obtaining funding was only a problem for approximately half of the teachers but this was stressful for them.

Table 2

The Most Stressful Issues for Teachers

		Mean	sd	N
Being held accountable for the child's educational outcomes		4.03	0.88	38
The child physically attacks others e.g. hits, bites		3.85	1.14	13
Obtaining funding		3.77	1.19	22
Reduced ability to teach other students as effectively as you would like		3.72	1.03	36
Taking full responsibility for the child's welfare		3.66	0.83	32
Constantly monitoring the child		3.65	1.04	20
The child has a short attention span		3.65	1.06	37
Sustaining an active learning environment for the child		3.61	.82	38
Meeting the child's needs		3.61	.79	38
The child has unpredictable reactions		3.58	1.17	19
The child is manipulative		3.57	1.12	19
The child displays inappropriate social skills		3.56	1.05	36

Note: Range = 2 (*not stressful);* 3 (*somewhat stressful*); 4 (*quite stressful*); to 5(*extremely stressful*)

Teachers were asked to indicate the usefulness of a range of coping behaviours for dealing with the stress associated with inclusive education. Table 3 indicates the coping strategies that teachers

considered were the most useful for them. The strategy that was considered by almost all of the teachers to be the most useful was that of maintaining a sense of humour. Other personal approaches included developing outside interests and trying to look on the bright side of things. Useful problem-focused coping strategies included making a plan of action, concentrating on what had to be done next, drawing on past experiences, and identifying different potential solutions. Discussing the situation with specialists or colleagues was also deemed to be quite useful for alleviating stress.

The small number of teachers who suggested that if stressed they would apply for sick or stress leave (N=6), resign from teaching (N=5), or use alcohol or medication (N=10), all considered that even though they might use these strategies they were not actually at all useful (M = < 2.30). A large number of teachers (N=25) indicated that when stressed they keep others from knowing how bad things really are but this was also considered not to be a useful coping strategy (Mean = 2.40).

Table 3

The Most Useful Coping Strategies for Teachers

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		Mean	sd	N
Maintain a sense of humour		4.20	.81	38
Make a plan of action and follow it		4.00	.69	38
Discuss the situation with specialist personnel e.g. AVT, ST(LD)		3.97	.91	36
Develop other interests outside school		3.94	.93	31
Discuss the situation with colleagues		3.81	.91	37
Draw on past experiences		3.81	.95	36
Concentrate on what has to be done next		3.79	.81	38
Come up with different solutions for difficult issues		3.69	.78	36
Try to look on the bright side of things		3.68	.78	37
Seek professional help for the child		3.65	.66	31
Enlist support of the other children		3.55	.77	31

Note: Range = 2 (*not useful*); 3 (*somewhat useful*); 4 (*quite useful*); to 5(*extremely useful*)

Table 4

The Least Useful Coping Strategies for Teachers During Inclusive Education

Coping Strategy		Mean	sd	N
Apply for sick or stress leave		2.00	.00	6
Resign from teaching		2.00	.00	5
Use alcohol or medication		2.30	.48	10
Keep others from knowing how bad things really are		2.40	.71	25

Note: Range = 2 = (*not useful*) 3 = (*somewhat useful*)

4 = (*quite useful*) 5 = (*extremely useful*)

Discussion

The overall response by regular class teachers to potential stressors associated with inclusive education appears to be fairly moderate. Although teachers report inclusive education to be stressful the general view is that this is only in the somewhat stressful range. Whereas, some specific issues are more stressful than others, the most stressful areas are those that challenge a teachers' perceived professional competence. Regular class teachers are most concerned about their own responsibility for the child, and their ability to cater for the child's needs while still maintaining effective teaching of the other children. Almost all included children were deemed to display inappropriate social skills and have short attention spans and this was quite stressful for teachers. Approximately half the children required constant monitoring, exhibited unpredictable reactions, and were manipulative. In addition, 32.5% of included children reportedly physically attacked, hit, or bit other children.

The most effective coping strategy employed by regular class teachers to help cope with stress associated with inclusive education was that of maintaining a sense of humour. Developing other interests outside school, and trying to look on the bright side of things were also considered quite useful affective strategies. Problem-focused strategies that were useful included making a plan of action, drawing on past experiences, and collaborating with colleagues. The least useful strategies involved taking leave, resigning, or using alcohol or medication to help cope with stress, although at least one eighth of all teachers said that they would employ these strategies.

It would seem clear that regular class teachers take their responsibilities extremely seriously regarding providing appropriate educational opportunities for all children in their classes. Fullan and Hargreaves (1991) have proposed that teachers do not need external pressures to set their own high standards. This appears to be the case here as the potential difficulties associated with inclusive educational practices which are causing teachers most stress are those that they establish for themselves. The highest levels of stress come from a teacher's personal commitment to undertake full responsibility and accountability for the child's progress. It would seem that urgent attention needs to be given to a more collaborative and supportive approach to inclusive education which places less pressure on the perceived individual ownership which currently exists among teachers for the child and more emphasis on a whole school approach and shared responsibility for including children with disabilities in regular classes. There also appears to be a desperate need to address the apparent poor social skills of children with disabilities who are included in regular classes, and in particular the relatively high proportion of children who physically attack others.

Finally, on a lighter note, while not actively promoting a school jester approach to alleviating stress, school staff should seriously consider the appropriateness of developing greater collegiality among themselves, initiating good support systems, and arranging plenty of opportunities for maintaining a sense of humour and a time for a more light-hearted approach to some of the educational challenges that they face.

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